

## Sinophone Queerness and Female Auteurship in Zero Chou's Drifting Flowers

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**Sinophone Queerness and Female Auteurship  
in Zero Chou's *Drifting Flowers***

Zoran Lee Pecic

**Abstract**

This article investigates the third instalment of the Taiwanese director Zero Chou's *tongzhi* trilogy. It suggests that her 2009 film *Drifting Flowers* defies the “global gay” narratives of identity formation whilst remaining rooted in Taiwan's cultural and geographical space. The article argues that the inter- and intratextual elements in Chou's cinema position her as a Taiwanese queer auteur whose inclusive queerness points to new directions in not only New Queer Sinophone Cinema but also queer cinema globally.

**Keywords:** Zero Chou, *tongzhi* trilogy, tomboyism, *Drifting Flowers*, intertextuality

In the first instalment of Zero Chou's *tongzhi* trilogy—a designation for her three consecutive queer features *Splendid Float* (2004), *Spider Lilies* (2007) and *Drifting Flowers* (2008)—we are introduced to a Taoist priest Roy whose daytime job is to perform funeral services for the benefit of the grieving family members.<sup>1</sup> At night, however, Roy becomes Rose, a drag queen who puts on cabaret shows with his garishly-dressed companions on the back of their van as they tour the island of Taiwan.<sup>2</sup> The van resembles a *dianzi huache*—an electronic flower car—a Taiwanese funeral ritual where scantily-dressed young women dance as a way of entertaining the gods and well as amusing the funeral goers. This complex configuration of gender performativity, drag and localised Taiwanese ritual performances is indicative of the multifaceted and highly original cinema of Zero Chou. Whilst *Splendid Float* highlights the working classes in rural settings, the second film of the trilogy moves to the urban spaces of Taipei, as the webcam girl Jade attempts to seduce her childhood crush Takeko, who has imposed upon herself not to pursue her lesbian desires which she is convinced are to blame for her brother's amnesia.

Like the first film in the trilogy, *Spider Lilies* is deeply rooted in Taiwan's history, as the 921 Earthquake serves as a catalyst for the ensuing trauma. Yet, despite these local and cultural specificities, both films carry transnational elements that are consumed and made intelligible beyond the borders of Taiwan. In this article, I argue that the last film of the trilogy—*Drifting Flowers*—which explores decades of Taiwan's LGBT histories and cultures, signals a new direction in international queer cinema, as it remains vigilant to national historical specificities whilst defying the “global gay” narratives of identity formation. Moreover, Chou positions herself—via inter-and intratextual means—as a *female* queer auteur, distancing herself from her already-established male counterparts and in so doing signifying a new turn in Sinophone as well as global queer cinema.

In his controversial essay on the “global gay” identity, Dennis Altman argues that there exist two contradictory tendencies in the articulations of homosexuality in Asia:

On the one hand, Asian gay men, by stressing a universal gay identity, underline a similarity with Westerners. Against this, on the other hand, the desire to assert an “Asian” identity, not unlike the rhetoric of the “Asian way” adopted by authoritarian regimes such as those of China, Indonesia, and Malaysia, may undermine this assumed solidarity (418-419).

“The ubiquity of western rhetoric” in Asia, Altman notes, indicates that these men “use the language of the west to describe a rather different reality” (419). Here he not only presupposes an incompatibility of “western style” and “Asian”; he also posits that Asian gay men employ

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<sup>1</sup> Coined by Edward Lam as part of a translation for a segment on New Queer Cinema for the Golden Horse Film Festival in 1992, the term *tongzhi* “caught on quickly in both Hong Kong and Taiwan, first as a preferred term of self-identification ... and later as a widely accepted umbrella term of reference to sexual minorities” (Leung 2008, 3).

<sup>2</sup> In fact, we may argue that as the film progresses it becomes evident that this constellation should be viewed in reverse. It is Rose, the performer, who during daytime becomes Roy, the priest.

the rhetoric of the “West” as a means of viewing themselves as a part of a global gay community that ultimately supersedes any cultural differences between them. This Western rhetoric, then, is used by the “community” to describe the encounter between the “global” West and the “indigenous” local East. Significantly, Altman not only re-constructs the dividing line between the East and the West—by emphasising the gap between Asians and Westerners, Altman fails to question the meaning and the validity of both terms.

In her seminal work *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (2007), Lisa Rofel addresses Altman’s claims by arguing that “the emergence of gay identities and practices in China is tied, in certain critical respects, to transnational networks of lesbians and gay men” (87).<sup>3</sup> Although “the presence of foreign gay men and lesbians in China who both create and participate in gay networks means that the transnational quality of gayness in China is both visible and visceral” (87-88), Rofel notes, this does not translate as evidence of the globality of the homogenous gay identity. Rather, she notes, “the emergence of gay identities in China occurs in a complex cultural field representing neither a wholly global culture nor simply a radical difference from the West” (88-89). Arguing against the self-evident characteristics of “the West”, Rofel notes that Altman’s claim does not account for the (im)balance of power in global gay discourses:

Asianness, or a reputed claim to Asianness, can never be more than a distraction, a power move, or a distortion from the originary truths of gayness. Gay men in Asia can be either universal or Asian but not both, even as their Asianness continues to leave them in the place of otherness to global gayness. Altman’s Western origin story of gay liberation places Asian gays forever in the place of deferred arrival. (91)

Arguing against the global gay based on the self-evident notions of the West—a view which she describes as “irresistible”—Rofel points out that Altman’s ambivalent desire to “assert cultural diversity and the need to respect it while also recuperating identification in a monumentalist history of gay identity”, turns not into a promotion of gay rights but in an erasure of “diversity, articulation, and alliance with radical cultural difference” (90). What is needed, Rofel argues, is a problematisation of the notions such as “Western”, “Asian”, “local” and “global,” as a means of not only decentralising the universalism of Euro-American notions of a “gay” identity but also of exposing the power relations inherent in such a concept. Significantly, Rofel urges scholars to reconfigure the concept of culture “not as a set of shared meanings found in a bounded space but rather as ongoing discursive practices with sedimented histories that mark relations of power” (93). I introduce here Rofel’s arguments, not because I wish to look at the imbalances of power vis-à-vis the notions of “coming out” between “Asia” and “the West” in Zero Chou’s film. Rather, I wish to explore the ways *Drifting Flowers*

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<sup>3</sup> Whilst Rofel looks at the emergence of gay identities and practices in postsocialist (Mainland) China, her arguments about the complex cultural field of non-normative sexuality in China are highly useful for my notions of queer Sinophone cinema as that which is local and global, here and there.

nuances queerness in ways that neither complies with established notions of temporal development nor proposes an “authentic” sexual identity that is “inherently” Taiwanese.

Building on numerous scholars’ questioning of the essentialised notions of “Chineseness”, I argue elsewhere that we are able to recodify Chineseness in a way that defies national unity without disregarding the close cultural and ethnic links between the PRC, Hong Kong and Taiwan (Pecic 2016). By employing the notions of the Sinophone (Shih 2007, Lu 2007) in our investigations of queer “Chinese” cinema, we are able to position a new queer Sinophone cinema in a context that takes it beyond the borders of the PRC, Taiwan and Hong Kong. New Queer Sinophone Cinema is very much global, as it depends on the markets, circuits and modes of distribution that can only be found outside of China. Yet, it is a cinema of China-based filmmakers, whose films are set in contexts and histories that require localised and regional knowledges. By arguing that New Queer Sinophone Cinema is neither inherently queer nor exclusively Chinese, we are able to position it in a transnational and translocal space that is simultaneously “here” and “there” (Pecic 2016). It is within this framework that I investigate Chou’s film, in that it displays a highly nuanced positioning of Sinophone queerness that neither unmistakably local nor inherently global.

In his review of the film for *Variety* at the 2008 Berlin Film Festival, Derek Elley notes that it “moseys along for 90-odd minutes, seemingly content to speak largely in lesbian clichés”. In particular, Elley summarises the film as being “centered on a group of femmes struggling with that old gay chestnut, ‘identity’”. Elley also remarks that the “three-parter looks to bounce into fest dates on the strength of Chou’s niche success with last year’s ‘Spider Lilies’”. Here, the reviewer positions the film as not only a recognisable product of its successful lesbian director but also an expected one, in which “femmes” go through hardships on their way to full realisation of their lesbian identity. Perhaps even more significant are Elley’s considerations as to the reasons behind the film’s apparent shortcomings: “But without Asian name leads behaving transgressively onscreen this time, theatrical biz looks far weaker, especially in the East”. Here, the lack of “transgressive” behaviour in the “East” is positioned—in the image of modern Euro-American lesbian and gay narratives of identity and gay visibility—as the film’s weakness.

Rather than identifying additional instances where Chou’s film is positioned in the impossible space between cliché (conforming to already established notions of sexual identity) and insufficiency (aspiring towards recognised standards of plot development and closure), I argue that *Drifting Flowers* employs and eschews both, as it challenges both Western transgender tropes as well as linear coming out narratives. Specifically, by employing and reworking the memorial condition and the tomboy melodrama as noted by Fran Martin (2010), Chou’s film makes a signification contribution to queer Sinophone cinema that defies the global gay narratives of identity formation. Significantly, I argue that Chou positions herself—via inter- and intratextual elements—as a *female* queer auteur, distancing herself from her already-established male counterparts and pointing towards a new turn in not only New Queer Sinophone Cinema but perhaps also in queer cinema in a more global context.

The film, a triptych of the interlinked stories of Diego, Jing and Lily, tells of lesbian and queer desires that are neither romanticised nor victimised. Before the first part entitled “May” begins, we are introduced in the coda to some of the film’s motifs, such as railways and trains travelling through tunnels. Significantly, the unsteady camera of the opening scenes parallels not only the ramifications of Alzheimer’s Disease from which Lily suffers but also its effects on our memory and the perception of time, as we realise later on that these events in fact occur later in the film’s timeframe. Thus, the film “in effect” begins with the second part entitled “Lily” (which features similar scenes), defying a clear timeline and introducing the notion of a warped temporality. This is not to say that the film’s narrative structure is merely non-linear; although some of the characters from each of the three parts appear elsewhere, the timeline does not indicate a logical temporal development. Whilst it appears that the first part acts as a prologue to the second—May, for instance, goes from being a child to an adolescent—the third part serves as a prologue to the first, as we find the young Diego working for her family’s puppet theatre business in the 1960s. However, upon a closer inspection, we realise that in the final coda, in which all three female characters appear, Lily’s ageing does not correspond to that of May or Diego. In other words, whilst May’s development from a child to an adolescent covers a timespan of approximately ten years, this period is significantly longer in the character of Lily. Likewise, Diego, who stands on the train with her accordion appears to be the same age as when May saw her for the first time as a child.

This warped temporality forecloses a simplistic viewing of the film as offering a historical development of queer cultures in Taiwan. For instance, Huang and Wang note that the third story “Diego” is “about how the *tie* T Diego comes to realize who she is. ... Diego’s experiences as she comes of age can be taken to represent the collective memories of the generation of butch lesbians who grew up in Taiwan in the 1960s” (149-150, emphasis in original).<sup>4</sup> Although the film, particularly in the final story, does indeed portray specificities of local contexts, such as the puppet theatre in Kaohsiung, these elements do not always remain grounded in their own temporal contexts. Likewise, I argue that Diego’s coming of age must be not be seen solely as a narrative of development from the past to the present. Rather, the temporal warping in *Drifting Flowers* presents and imagines queer relations in/from not only the past but also those in the future.

In her study of female homoeroticism in contemporary mainstream Chinese media and cultures, Martin writes:

A dominant modern Chinese discourse on female homoeroticism has asserted the impossibility of lesbian futures: sexual relations between women are culturally imaginable only in youth; therefore same-sex sexual relations may appear in adult femininity’s past, very rarely in the present, and never in its future. (6)

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<sup>4</sup> For more on the *T/Po* binary, see Chao.

Martin emphasises the backwards looking—*memorial*—mode of narration, where same-sex love and desire is forcibly precluded by the heteronormative social impositions of family members or other social figures. These narratives are significant, Martin argues, in that their “mournful ... remembrance of same-sex love as a kind of paradise lost implies a critique of the social imposition of hetero-marital relations upon young women as a condition of feminine adulthood” (7).<sup>5</sup> In other words, the very existence of these narratives undermines the hegemonic hetero-marriage by making explicit the personal cost upon which heteronormativity is contingent. This does not imply that there exists a wish to supplant the heterosexual marriage with a homosexual one. On the contrary, the existence of these narratives *within* the Chinese mainstream, mass-culture testifies to their *coexistence* with the dominant sexual systems. Therefore, the enforced and enforcing heterosexuality is simultaneously reaffirmed and disputed:

The idealization of women’s youthful same-sex love and desire, framed as a universal female experience, is remarkably common, and the pain caused by the renouncement of this love is frankly avowed, not simply papered over to enable an air of triumph in the stories’ heterosexual conclusions” (Martin 2010: 8).

In addition to the memorialising mode, which fastens homoerotic desires to the past as a way of excluding it from the present, Martin identifies another significant element of Sinophone mass-cultural representations of female same-sex relations—the tomboy melodrama. Whilst the majority of the mass same-sex representations feature “normatively feminine protagonists, nonetheless in both popular representations and self-understandings on the part of the self-identifying lesbians in China, Taiwan and Hong Kong today, the gendered distinction between masculine and feminine women ... is central” (Martin 2010: 13). In terms of the memorial mode, however, Martin notes that the latter category—that of “temporary” same-sex love of feminine women—overwhelmingly outnumbers the cultural representations of “permanent lesbianism” of masculine women (tomboys). Significantly, whilst the contemporary Chinese tomboy narrative typically comes in the shape of a “social problem melodrama”, it is at odds with the feminine (protagonist’s) memorial narrative. Therefore, as a particular social problem genre, the tomboy narrative “is held at a greater distance than the schoolgirl romance from sexual and gender normativity” (2010: 14). This distancing, Martin notes, precludes identification with the tomboy, or the “victim-hero”, as we the readers/viewers are encouraged to take a sympathetic, onlooker view, situated within the sphere of normativity. Moreover, the temporality of the tomboy is that of “no-future”. Whilst the feminine protagonist’s future has conventionally been defined as ending in a heterosexual marriage, the tomboy’s future “has been strictly unimaginable—a kind of blank space in the popular imaginary, commonly dealt with by the most expeditious means of having tomboy protagonists die young” (Martin 2010: 112).

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<sup>5</sup> Some of the narratives noted by Martin include the Taiwanese author Chu T’ien-hsin’s short story “Waves Scour the Sand” (“Lang tao sha”, 1976), Beijing author Liu Suola’s novella *Blue Sky, Green Sea* (*Lan tian lü hai*, 1985), the Taiwanese TV drama series *The Unfilial Daughter* (*Nini*; Ko Yi-zheng, 2001), and the PRC’s first lesbian feature film *Fish and Elephant* (*Jin nian xia tian*, Li Yu, 2001).

In *Drifting Flowers*, we find elements of both the schoolgirl romance as well as the tomboy melodrama. Where Chou's film differs, however, is in its positioning of Diego, for although the viewer is encouraged to sympathise with the tomboy, her same-sex attraction does not become a scourge of her tragic existence and an ultimate and unavoidable end. In fact, not only does Diego not face a tragic death; we are aware—due to the film's chronology—that she will ultimately partner with Jing. More significantly, perhaps, she serves as a lynchpin of the three stories, as her character has a bearing on May's, Lily's and Yen's life. In *Drifting Flowers*, Chou does not privilege either the inside or the outside view of Diego. For instance, in "May", the optical point of view of that of the eponymous girl, who is enamoured and ultimately falls in love with her sister's accordion player. In "Diego", we are privy to the familial and societal pressures exerted onto Diego, whilst the "Lily" section hardly features her at all. Yet in each instance, Diego is present not as a "victim-hero" but as a friend and a lesbian who has had an impact and continues to effect both Yen and Lily (and May). In terms of queer affiliation, Helen Leung notes that the friendship between Yen and Lily—captured most vividly in the scene where they both sit on a train platform dressed in women's clothes—"is based not on sexual attraction but on compassion, mutual dependence, and a shared experience of living queer lives" (2012: 532). Likewise, the childhood scenes in which Diego and Yen discuss their relationship and the reasons behind their strong bonds, "provides a nuanced and finely tuned portrayal of the complex dynamics between two queer friends. While Yan is attracted to Diego's boyishness, Diego is in turn drawn to Yan's femininity. In other words, they each appreciate the other's queer gender presentation" (Leung 2012: 532).

In terms of queer desire, on the other hand, the sexual attraction between Diego and Lily, as they take shelter from the rain in a van at the concluding stages of the film, has a two-pronged effect. Whilst it codes both women's "sexual identity" as lesbian, thus paralleling a coming out narrative, the ensuing laughter seems to oppose this view, as both characters appear to be cognisant of these very expectations. Here, instead of familiarisation, the viewer experiences estrangement, as both women appear to be playing tricks with the audience's expectations. Moreover, as the scene moves to slow motion, the women appear to be looking through the windscreen as if on to a film screen (reminiscent of a drive-in cinema), replicating the role of the expecting viewer. This familiarising/defamiliarising effect evokes and destabilises the expectations of "transgressive" behaviour in East Asian queer cinema, as it makes explicit the problems of categorising the representation of queerness as either clichéd or inadequately transgressive.

Significantly, we are precluded from reading the scene as one that would position Diego on either side of the inside/outside binary, for if, as Martin argues, "the schoolgirl romance narrated by a conventionally feminine woman is a memorial narrative that looks back on youthful same-sex romance", a reversal of this would be a "same-sex attracted tomboy schoolgirl looking *forward* to potentially lesbian adulthood" (2010: 116, emphasis in original). Thus, whilst the temporality of Chou's film allows a potential realisation of a tomboy lesbian adulthood, the scene above would not be its starting point in a linear narrative, since we as the audience are aware that Diego will later find Jing, whilst Lily would partner with Ocean. In both instances, Diego is positioned as a childhood crush, a queer friend, and a sexual and



lesbian partner, forming a queer connection with all of the characters. In *Drifting Flowers*, lesbianism is neither minoritised (the figure of a tomboy) nor made universal (the figure of a feminine woman). Rather, the film evokes and subverts both readings, as it ushers in a renewed understanding of same-sex female desire.

In his chapter on the poetics of Tsai Ming-liang's queer cinema, Song Hwee Lim notes that "what is queer about Tsai's works is not the literal representation of queer sexuality but rather its metaphorical unrepresentability, intelligible only because of the conventions that Tsai has constructed in his oeuvre, from the theatrical to the cinematic" (2006: 131). These conventions include the use of symbols and metaphors as well as "intratextual practices [that] interpellate a particular kind of spectatorship that is predicated upon an established familiarity with his previous films" (2014: 50). As a consequence, Tsai's work encourages the audience to make connections between the individual films as a way uncovering motifs, recurrent themes and symbolism that make up his signature style. According to Lim, "by drawing attention to elements in his previous films, Tsai's intratextual practices serve to remind the audience of both the history and the historicity of his filmmaking, reinforcing, however unwittingly and unconsciously, the image of the director as an established filmmaker and, by implication, an auteur" (2014: 50). Whilst Tsai's refusal to be labelled as a "gay director" (Lim 2006) may stand in contrast to Chou's persona as an openly gay director, which positions her films within an identity politics framework that appears to speak to particular LGBT groups that demand higher sensitivity to issues of accurate representation, *Drifting Flowers* nonetheless establishes Chou as a female Taiwanese queer auteur whose intertextuality simultaneously references and talks back to the Taiwanese queer auteur Tsai Ming-liang.<sup>6</sup>

In the introduction to her edited volume *Chinese Women's Cinema: Transnational Contexts* (2011), Lingzhen Wang notes that "despite their large number and historical significance, few English-language studies have been devoted to Chinese women filmmakers or their films" (1). Whilst the majority of existing scholarship is devoted to body of work of internationally renowned male filmmakers—Hou Hsiao-hsien, Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige—there exist only a handful of studies on female women directors such as Ann Hui, Hu Mei and Sylvia Chang. "This is particularly disconcerting", Wang notes, "considering the rapid development of Chinese film studies and the increased establishment of feminist film studies in Western academia" (1). Whilst Wang argues that the nationalist turn in film studies as well as the advent of poststructuralism in the 1980s irrevocably altered the view of feminist film discourse, I emphasise Chou's auteurship in the context of the transnationality of Sinophone cinema. For the success of Chou's films owes as much to the international LGBT film circuits as it does to the national cinema of Taiwan. In other words, Chou's position as a queer auteur is as much a local as it is a global phenomenon.

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<sup>6</sup> Huang and Wang note that Chou included a breast-binding scene in *Drifting Flowers* "because many lesbians said that [she] had yet to give expression to the true voice of the *tie T*", p. 153, n. 28, emphasis in original.

Despite being a cinema of a small nation, Taiwan cinema's international prestige "is disproportionate to its size and can be largely attributed to a quartet of directors with an undisputed auteur status: Hou Hsiao-hsien, Edward Yang, Ang Lee, and Tsai Ming-liang. Indeed, these four directors are collectively responsible for always all top prizes that Taiwan cinema has won at the three most prestigious international film festivals (Berlin, Cannes, and Venice)" (Lim 2014: 47). In the case of Tsai Ming-liang, Lim notes that his "self-image as an auteur is rooted in his cinephilic obsession with the European New Wave cinemas of the 1960s and 70s, which he regards as the high point in film history" (2014: 45). Whilst the inter- and intratextual elements in Tsai's oeuvre have been instrumental in augmenting and solidifying his recognition and status on the international festival circuits, the popularity of Zero Chou's production on the national *as well as* the international stage is linked to what Martin argues is the new transnational

Taiwan cinema's negotiation "between the local and the global, the particular and the general, minority and mainstream audience, and cultural deterritorialization and reterritorialization" (2007: 131). Emphasising Taiwan-based filmmakers whose output, whilst grounded in Taiwan but drawing on investment overseas, "target[s] a broader international and domestic audience beyond hard-core auteurist art-film fans" (132), Martin notes that these filmmakers mark a new direction for Taiwan cinema, as the positioning of sexuality in these films is ambiguous enough to invite various and conflicting interpretations.

One such film is Yee Chih-yen's *Blue Gate Crossing*, a three-way high school drama that incorporates art-film elements with "promotional image-making style of a multinational fast-food corporation" (Martin 2007: 136). Not only does the film contain some of the elements of a coming out story; it also taps into the aforementioned narratives of the schoolgirl romance as well as the tomboy melodrama. In addition, the film could be said to be "transnationally oriented self-translating text ... a 'flexible, adaptable, user/reader/audience-friendly cultural product'". This is not because it exoticises Taiwan. On the contrary, it is the "effacement of any strong traces of the local" that make the film appealing to an international audience, as the local viewers attempt to re-localise the film within the space of Taipei, whilst the international audiences are being drawn to the "extra-local translatability" of the film's setting in what appears to be a "generic East Asian city" (Martin 2007: 139, 140). This multicoding allows the film a "smooth passage across geo-cultural and sexual-subcultural borders in order to maximize its market ... [as] its viewers effectively 'value-add' specificity in both respects at the moment of consumption, customizing this flexible product to cater to their local, specific needs and desires" (Martin 2007: 141).

Whilst Zero Chou places much heavier emphasis on the historical and cultural specificities of Taiwan, the Sinophone queerness in her films enables them to travel in space that is at once local, (inter)regional and transnational. In addition to the flexibility of her texts, I argue that Chou's intra- and intertextual practices serve not only as a reminder of the historicity of her filmmaking but also as a device that engages her cinephilic spectators, as they are "encouraged to pore over [her] earlier films ... for retrospective enlightenment" (Lim 2014: 54-55). This way, the spectator will also learn to "anticipate that elements ... will be taken into

unforeseeable directions in the future in a seriality and circularity that concretize [Chou's] position as an auteur" (55).

One of the most visible examples of Chou's intratextuality can be seen in a scene halfway into *Drifting Flowers*, in which we find Yen wandering the city after having a row with Lily. Here, a wall is plastered with identical posters of what appears to be Chou's own film *Spider Lilies*. Clearly visible is the Golden Bear logo of the Berlin International Festival, although on the poster we see two male actors, taking the places of Rainie Yang and Isabella Leong as Jade and Takeko as per the official poster. Leung views this as more than a "sly intratextual joke", as it also "captures the inclusive spirit of Chou's queer vision ... [to produce] a 'six-color rainbow cinema'" (531).<sup>7</sup> Similar to Tsai's intratextuality which, according to Lim, has been "instrumental in enhancing the international reception of [his] films and the viability of his filmmaking", Chou's reference to her own film enables her to "move from producing films in a national cinema mode to that of an international art cinema" (2014: 60).

In addition to this instance of intratextuality, I argue that the poster also serves as Chou's means for establishing herself as a Taiwanese *female* auteur, as the *intratextual* and *intertextual* elements in *Drifting Flowers* work in tandem, creating a link between herself and Tsai Ming-liang. In terms of casting, this is evident in the aforementioned opening scene featuring septuagenarian Lily, played by Lu Yi-Ching, a core actor in Tsai Ming-liang's films who would typically embody the role of the mother of Hsiao-kang, played by Tsai's regular collaborator Lee Kang-sheng.<sup>8</sup> The film features a regular of Chou's, namely Pai Chih-Ying, who in *Spider Lilies* plays the young Jade and who in *Drifting Flowers* plays the Jing's younger sister May. Whilst the choices in casting do not necessarily suggest a close linkage between Chou and Tsai, they only reinforce some of the other elements that appear to connect the two auteurs. In the "Lily" section of the film, the cause of the argument between Lily and Yen was Lily's hiding his suitcase from him, in effect making him stay with her (he had placed it near the door, suggesting his impending departure).

As he searches the apartment, we notice a green rice cooker on the kitchen table. Dedicated fans of Tsai's cinema may recognise the rice cooker as the same one that is on the table in the opening shot of *What Time Is It There?* (*Ni na bian ji dian*), Tsai's 2001 film about a watch vendor and a woman on holiday in Paris. The cooker, however, is itself an intratextual element, as it echoes two of Tsai's earlier films—*Rebels of the Neon God* (*Qingshaonian Nezha* 1992) and *The River* (*Heliu* 1997)—only this time its colour has changed from red to green. These intratextual elements in Tsai's oeuvre, which re-create and solidify his status as an auteur, depend on "discourses of cinephilia and authorship, which have particular currency in the

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<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, the rainbow series begins with the colour yellow, which infuses the symbolism of *Splendid Float*. Here, Sunny's yellow shirt works as a symbol of love (along with the yellow rose), whilst Roy's yellow shaman robes serve as a religious symbol of authority and power. In *Spider Lilies*, Jade's green wig serves as a symbol of trauma as well as queer desire. In *Drifting Flowers*, Yen's red suitcase serves as a symbol of movement and transience.

<sup>8</sup> Lu Yi-Ching's birth name is Lu Hsiao-Ling, which she changed mid-career.

institutions of the international film festival and the art house cinema” (Lim 2014: 46). This kind of authorship, Lim notes, is “performatively constituted ... so that the focus is not so much on the so-called genius of the author but rather on the discursive means by which certain kinds of cinematic agency are contingently constructed, come into being, and become visible” (46).



Figure 2: Green rice cooker on the dining table, *What Time Is It There?*



Figure 1: Green rice cooker on the dining table, *Drifting Flowers*.

In *Drifting Flowers*, Chou references visually an already-existing intratextual element of Tsai's oeuvre, in effect continuing the performance and establishing herself as an auteur in the process. In *What Time*, the static long take places the father in a scene with a dining table on the right, a corridor in the middle and a kitchen on the left of the frame. In Chou's film, the mise-en-scène is nearly inverted, as the shallow focus reverts our attention to Yen whilst he walks inside. In addition, despite being the family patriarch, the father in Tsai's film is killed off early in the film, as his widow mourns his passing by obsessing about the return of his ghost. One of the ways she displays her loss is by masturbating with his (wooden) pillow, whilst his black-and-white photograph looks on disapprovingly.

In *Drifting Flowers*, a similar scene occurs as Lily, now that she believes Ocean has returned, decides to take down the latter's black-and-white photograph. Here, Ocean's appearance is strikingly similar to that of the father. Whilst in both films a deceased partner casts a shadow over their surviving companion, in *Drifting Flowers* it is not the family patriarch but a lesbian partner who is being mourned. Given that both Lily and the mother are played by the same actress in the two films, we are here witness to a convergence and a differentiation of auteurship between Tsai Ming-liang and Zero Chou. Whilst Chou's final instalment of her *tongzhi* trilogy offers a renewed take on queer Sinophone filmmaking, she also appropriates Tsai's renowned “écriture queer”—his portrayal of male gay saunas, male pornographers, theatres as male cruising sights as well as father-son relationships—and offers a female take on the queer auteur by referencing and appropriating the cinephilic elements of the former. Chou's film, I contend, speaks to the “new” in New Queer Sinophone Cinema, in that her placing a lesbian character at the forefront in “Lily”, a tomboy in “Diego”, and an emerging lesbian in “May” (along with an AIDS stricken gay man), gestures towards a new direction in Taiwanese queer cinema that is inclusive, complex and historically and culturally specific (Pecic 2016).



Figure 3: Lily taking down Ocean's photograph, *Drifting Flowers*.



Figure 4: Father's stern look, *What Time Is It There?*

I began this article by noting that *Drifting Flowers*, whilst open to global interpretations of queerness and non-normative sexuality, remains calibrated to local and national histories. Likewise, the two previous films in Zero Chou's *tongzhi* trilogy exhibit the ability to employ and challenge local as well as global formations of culture and sexuality. In *Splendid Float*, customs intersect in a Thirdspace that combines the elements of the real and the fantastic.<sup>9</sup> Staging the drag performance on a mobile float on the bank of the Tamsui River, Chou positions this transient space between the heteronormative Firstspace of Taipei City and the theatrical Secondspace of the performance. Here, the main performer Roy/Rose becomes a figure that transverse boundaries between man/woman, heterosexuality/homosexuality and shamanism/drag. By invoking the theatricality of the native rituals, Chou provincialises Butlerian notions of drag as a discursive practice and provides it with a historical and a cultural context. In the melodrama *Spider Lilies*, Chou continues the reworking of Euro-American notions of gender parody by complicating the *T/Po* (butch/femme) binary. As the element of the Internet and online presence push the plot forward, the space in-between the real and the unreal intervenes not only into the memorial condition but also into the positioning of queerness as either local or global.

The inter- and intratextuality of *Drifting Flowers* solidify Chou's status as a Taiwanese queer auteur whose renewed take on queerness suggests new ways in a global queer cinema. More importantly, this highly nuanced positioning of Sinophone queerness also speaks to the workings of New Queer Sinophone Cinema, as it allows for an excavation and interrogation of spaces that are caught between the local and the global, between "China" and elsewhere, where queerness and same-sex desire are neither positioned as an event in the queer past nor as "oppressed" in the heterosexual present. The translocal and transnational Thirdspace in New Queer Sinophone Cinema challenges both a temporal and a spatial fixing of non-normative desires in "China", unfixing the notions of global gayness and sexual freedom and coalescing the affective and the political into a space that is both hybrid and lived. New Queer Sinophone Cinema emphasises that which lies between the visible and the invisible, between the real and the unreal, where familiarity and estrangement are coalesced in a queer space that challenges identificatory mechanisms that "fix" queerness in a particular position, in a particular place and at a particular time.

<sup>9</sup> I use Edward W. Soja's arguments on the social production of space. In *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (1996), Soja argues that Thirdspace complicates material and mental spaces, breaking up the dualism of that which is "real" and "imagined". Thirdspace, according to Soja, is 'simultaneously real and imagined and more (both and also...)' (11).

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## Filmography

- Drifting Flowers* [*Piao lang qing chun*] (motion picture) (2008), Taiwan: The 3<sup>rd</sup> Vision Films, Director Zero Chou.
- Spider Lilies* [*Ci qing*] (motion picture) (2007), Taiwan: The 3<sup>rd</sup> Vision Films, Director Zero Chou.

*Splendid Float* [*Yan guang si she gewutuan*] (motion picture) (2004), Taiwan: ZeHo Illusion Studio, Director Zero Chou.

*What Time Is It There?* [*Ni na bian ji dian*] (motion picture) (2001), Taiwan: Arena Films/Homegreen Films, Director Tsai Ming-liang.